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## MAN'S CONCEPTION OF GOD FROM AN HISTORICAL STANDPOINT.

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*Man a religious being.—Why?—Primitive revelation.—From a process of reasoning.—Observation of nature.—Agnosticism.—Divinely implanted instinct or faculty.—Meagreness of accurate information as to historical religions heretofore.—Avenues now open.—Explorations.—Philology.—Archæology.—Psychology.—Ethnography.—Mythology.—Folk lore.—Evolution a factor.—The recognition of the existence of gods, or gods universal.—Necessity of viewing conception from observer's standpoint.—Indian conception.—Hebrew.—Christian.—Elements changing currents of thought.—Seeds of religion, elements modifying growth.—Race characteristics, environments political surroundings.*

As far back as authentic history reaches, man has been a religious, or worshipping being. Exploration and research among the ruins of prehistoric times conclusively point in the same direction. Worship presupposes an object worshipped, a god, or gods, a something above man, an object, if not of veneration, gratitude or reverence, then an object of supremacy and power capable of being exerted to his advantage or disadvantage, his weal or woe, and susceptible, if properly approached, of wielding such power for his benefit. Though his purposes have been innumerable, and oftentimes crude and child-like, yet, man in all ages, whether savage or civilized, has sought, from one motive or another, by one process or another, to obtain the good-will and gracious favor of his god or gods. Whether his goal has been the attainment of happiness, here or hereafter, or the averting of punishment, here or hereafter, man's whole history exhibits a constant effort, on his part, to place himself at one with his deity. The sacred books of Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, India, China, and Palestine all tell the same story, and are the written records of man's aspirations for, and his grasping after, the infinite. The fetishes and totems of the

savage and the splendid temples of Thebes and Jerusalem alike are evidences of his conception of god and of his desire and effort to place himself on terms of reconciliation and meritorious favor with that god.

But how are we to account for this universally prevalent disposition, or inclination, on the part of man to worship? Why is it that he worships the sun, the moon, the earth, or any object in nature, or nature itself? Why does he worship God, or many gods, or any god at all? To these inquiries many answers have been given. Some have maintained that man's conception of God is an inheritance derived from an original and primitive direct revelation. Others have supposed that the idea of the existence and attributes of a Supreme Being resulted from a process of pure reasoning, on the part of man. Others still have as strongly maintained that the idea is to be attributed solely to the observation of nature, its beauty, its grandeur, its harmony and laws. Others have maintained that the idea of God is inconceivable, unknowable, and that man's conceptions on the subject are mere chimeras, and worship, in all its forms, a superstition. While still others have insisted that man was created a worshipping being, receiving from his creator a divinely implanted faculty or instinct, capable of apprehending the Infinite, with an inclination and longing therefor; or, in other words, that religion is inherent in man, and is in him a mode of action, a potential energy quite as much as the forces and powers are inherent in material substances, gravity for instance, "and, if we will but listen attentively, we can hear in all religions a groaning of the spirit . . . a longing after the Infinite, a love of God." Cicero has said, "*Natura insculpsit in mentibus ut Deos aeternos et beatos haberemus.*"

But it is not within the scope of this paper to answer all or any of the questions propounded, or critically to examine the answers given above, except in so far as the treatment of the subject may incidentally trench thereon. It is intended to outline, in the briefest possible manner, the belief of man as to his objects of worship, as we find such belief embodied in the various phases of the historical religions of the world, viewed solely from an

historical standpoint. Comparative religion has taken too firm a hold on the minds of thinking men, and the advantages to be derived therefrom have become too firmly established longer to require an apology for invoking its aid, or resorting to its methods in the treatment of a subject of this kind.

The time has been when the name of God was regarded as too sacred to be pronounced even by mortal lips, and to avoid the speaking of the name various devices have been resorted to, all of which have brought about more or less confusion. Some nationalities or tribes have entertained comparatively well defined ideas concerning God, that were analogous to those of strict monotheists, yet they never permitted those conceptions to assume or become embodied in appellative forms, much less proper names. It is not all improbable that many of our modern theologians and writers would be misunderstood if listened to or read by those who are ignorant of our beliefs and current modes of expression, if indeed they were not called gross polytheists. The pictorial possibilities of language are such, and the fascination of imagery so developed in our natures, that it is feared we sometimes almost trench on the domain of image worship itself in our written and spoken dealings with sacred things. While reverence towards God is, in the very highest degree, commendable, yet, if the inquiry Whom do men say that I, the Son of Man, am? was not irreverent when made it cannot be so now, if we but make use of the inquiry in a proper manner for proper motives. If the heavens declare God's glory and the firmament is an evidence of his handiwork it cannot be sacrilegious to inquire into and examine the impress that God has left on man. If man is the image of God, and we take into consideration his accomplishments thus far, and the possibilities of the future, with all nature and its laws at his command, it may be that he will be regarded in coming ages the best and highest revelation of God.

Until within the century now closing our information of the belief and worship of Egypt, Chaldea, Babylonia and Assyria, Persia, India and China, was derived from mere historical fragments compiled at ages of the world when facilities for accurate information were exceedingly meagre, and frequently by men

who were wholly unacquainted with the language and the people whose religion they sought to portray. In some cases their only means of information was through an observation of the—to them—strange forms and ceremonies, of a strange people, speaking an unknown tongue. In other cases their knowledge was derived from the officiating priests who oftentimes, among their own people even, embodied their thoughts in a dead language and enveloped their acts and religious ceremonies in mystery, and could not be expected to, and as we now know, did not disclose to their foreign inquisitors very full information regarding their beliefs and sacred worship. We also know that much of the history we have, has been strangely discolored by the medium through which our information has been transmitted. The fragments we have from Berossus, and the statements from Herodotus, Diodorus, and many others, are warped and distorted, unintentionally it may be, by the infiltrations of Greek thought. Philo and many of the early Christian fathers spoke and wrote of things as seen through Grecian atmosphere impregnated with the philosophy of their times, and used a terminology poorly adapted to the subject matter they were considering. Even in modern times much of our religious historical literature seems to indicate a feeling, either expressed or implied, in the minds of the writers, that surely no good can come out of Nazareth, if not akin to that other thought born on Arabian soil that there is no god but God and Mohammed is his prophet. It has only been within recent times that sectarian walls have begun to show evidence of decay, and it has been thought lawful to drink from the wells of Samaria, or even from those of Hindustan or Persia.

But thanks to the patient and scholarly investigation of the nineteenth century we are now enabled to read the thoughts, feelings and emotions that actuated men in remote antiquity, long ages before Abram left Ur of the Chaldees. Explorations have brought to light from the ruins of two continents inscriptions that speak to us in the very words of primitive man. Explorers in another field, philology, have also dug up from another class of ruins treasures of priceless value that have lain hidden for thousands of years. Archæology has done much to

enable us to see primitive man as he was, as he thought, lived and died. Psychology, ethnography, mythology and folk-lore, have carried us back to the formative periods of the civilized races of men and opened up to us vast treasure houses of information stored when Europe was a wilderness and America unknown. And thus we are brought face to face with, hear the voice of, and learn the thoughts and yearnings of, man far back towards the infancy of the human race. We have the authentic records that bear the seals of the writers and impart a verity that is beyond question. The revelations from the ruins of Thebes and Nineveh disclose no field for redactors, no mistakes of copyists and no discolorations of subsequent commentators. The prayers and songs of the sacred books of Egypt and Babylon, India and Persia pour forth the beliefs, hopes and aspirations of men who were at least contemporaries of Moses and David. All these things can only portend an era of better thought, more accurate information, higher methods of treatment, and more useful results in the science of comparative religion.

At the very threshold of our investigation of this subject we discover a law applicable to every field of inquiry, every religion, or branch of religion, and the various phenomena attending the outward forms of worship. That law is the law of progress, development or evolution. It is true the very mention of the word evolution has a harsh grating on the nerves of those who entertain the traditional idea of a supposed prehistoric and primitive special revelation at a time when mankind are supposed to have lived in a state of simplicity and moral rectitude, constantly in communion with God, and subsequently began a course of retrogression, ending in polytheism and pagan darkness. That God could have so revealed himself specially to primitive man is true, but whether he did or not is pure speculation without an iota of evidence to sustain the assumption. That he has revealed himself through chosen instruments, in historical times, and is still doing so, the whole history of man furnishes an abundance of evidence. We know the earth in its preparation for man's habitation has been a series of progressive steps. We have many indications that the universe is undergoing a similar process of

development. Prehistoric archæology conclusively shows that man himself has passed from the chipped stone age to the polished stone age, thence to a copper or bronze age, thence to an iron age, and thence to a steam or an electric age, or as another has said: We can trace man from a time when he was the contemporary of the *Elephas Antiquus*, with perhaps no knowledge of fire or clothing and certainly none of earthenware, when his only implement was a flint mallet or hatchet; thence he passed to an age in which he lived exclusively by hunting, clothed himself in skins, dwelt in caves or roamed in nomadic hordes; thence he passed to an age of simple agriculture, possessing domestic animals, and lived in little groups or clans on fortified heights or in lake cities; thence he passed on to a later age of barter and exchange, in developing commerce, cities and the concomitants of intercommunication; later on came writing and the age of inscriptions. Philology furnishes unmistakable evidence of the same law of progression, in opposition to the supposed primeval revelation of language, and that language the Hebrew. The language of children and savages we know to be extremely simple, dealing almost solely with the concrete, and wholly devoid of abstract ideas. Words, to us representing ideas intricate and complicated, when traced to their sources, represented to primitive man ideas extremely simple. What volumes of meaning are embraced in our English word *deity*, but when we trace it back through its Teutonic, Roman and Greek equivalents to an original Aryan source we find it in the Sanskrit *diaus*, meaning "sky." The same law of evolution is apparent in the forms of government, in art, in science, in literature. Astronomy is an unbroken, step by step, gradation from Chaldean astrology up to its present position. And as D'Alviella says: "Do what we may we can no longer escape the necessity of submitting the religious sentiment to the general law of evolution which affirms the concurrent principles of continuity and progress, whether in the cosmography of the sidereal world, the geology of the terrestrial sphere, the palæontology of living beings, or the archæology and history of the human race." To the same effect are the conclusions of that prince of investigators in this field of modern thought, Max

Müller, as well as the more conservative but scholarly De Pressensé, and many others. We have dwelt at length upon this phase of the subject for reasons that will be more apparent later on.

A careful study of the world's religions will establish the existence of certain facts underlying them all, and this is especially true regarding the conceptions of God and man's attempts to place himself in harmony with that of God, through the medium of the many forms of worship that have been adopted. (1) In all religions, man has recognized the existence of some being or beings, some object or thing, by him supposed to be superior to and above himself. (2) A feeling of weakness in himself and a dependence upon that being or beings, object or thing assumed to exist. (3) A belief or faith on his part in his ability to reach his God or gods, by the use of some form or other of sacrifice, offering, or prayer. (4) A like belief or faith that, on the proper approach to that God or gods, his wishes, desires or hopes will be realized. These phenomena, so far as they relate to man's religious manifestation, are universal, found alike in the most benighted savage as well as in the highest form of civilized man, everywhere and at all times, and under all circumstances and conditions.

First, then, as to the recognition by man of the existence of a being or beings, object or thing, by him supposed to be superior to himself. At the very threshold of our investigation we are met by confusion and chaos. In his groping after the infinite, man has laid hold of the tangible and intangible, the natural and supernatural, the earth, the moon, the sun, the stars, and even the universe itself. This confusion, growing out of the multiplicity of gods, is somewhat dissipated, however, when we come to take into consideration the circumscribed horizon of the observer. That we must do, to understand correctly and interpret the religion of any individual or people. Standing on the mountain top the horizon is broad and illimitable. Measured from our standpoint, with all the civilizations of the past below us, we are disposed to be too critical of those who dwelt in the valleys of the Nile, the Euphrates and the Indus. The philosophers of Athens recognized the shortsightedness and



imperfections in the visions of those below them, as did Paul on Mars Hill. Confucius, Gautama, and Zoroaster likewise saw the short-comings of their people, as did Moses from Sinai. The prophets not only saw the waywardness of Israel, but its blindness as well. Thus it is, seeing through a "glass darkly," we measure mankind in our own bushel, and weigh Paganism by the current standards of today. Looking at man in his march down through the ages we see his pathway strewn with errors innumerable, the greatest lesson from which to us should be charity. The most profound thought of the Indian of America was that there was a Great Spirit that would assist him in his chase, and that Spirit he made his God. The most exalted idea of the Hebrew was that of a national God, with jurisdiction and power confined to the limits of Israel. The grand conception of the Christian is of a Creator, a Heavenly Father, infinite in love and goodness, extending to and embracing, not only all nations of the earth, but every creature in whom is the breath of life. Herodotus and Strabo had no right to grow merry over the crudities of Egypt, nor has the pseudo-philosopher of today historical license to interpret the past by the light of this or any other century. Are we yet on firm ground? With all the intelligence and learning, all the knowledge and wisdom, all the manifold advantages of which we boast, coupled with all the teachings of thousands of years in the school of monotheism, no two of us would entirely agree in our conceptions of God, his attributes and power. And if we were but to attempt to assign Him a name, what utter confusion would follow! Does any one believe the conceptions of God entertained by Calvin coincided with those of Luther or Melancthon? Thus it is that we find belief upon belief, strata upon strata, from the lowest forms in savage life to the highest forms in civilized man, and the true historian cannot expect to find imbedded in these beliefs or strata, conceptions belonging to a higher form of civilization. As well might we expect to find the problems of higher mathematics in the curriculum of the Hottentot. Neither is it reasonable to read into the laws of Moses or Manu, the psalms of Israel or Babylon, the science and philosophy, the religions and morals

of a later age. The sciences of astronomy and geology are divine, and the astronomer and geologist must walk nearer to God in searching out and unfolding the laws pertaining to the earth or the universe, but here again we must wait the "fulness of time" for our revelations.

Moreover, we must not expect the great streams of thought to be uniform in any branch of investigation. The great river, in its course, meets with many modifying influences, many obstructions and confluent streams, all changing more or less its general character or deflecting its course to the right or to the left. In the political life of a nation not infrequently its whole trend is changed by a Gladstone. The philosophy of Socrates and Plato has its influence in the present age. And so it is in the world of religious life. The Buddhas and Mahomets often change the whole current of thought, and these influences must be carefully weighed and estimated if we would correctly understand the history of the past, and oftentimes the current history of the present.

There are many phenomena attending man's belief in God that the thoughtful student must also carefully note, estimate, and weigh. Not infrequently are to be found, in the same people and running parallel with each other, conceptions of God of the very highest excellence and moral grandeur, and conceptions of the most anthropomorphic nature. How is it that in the Zend Avesta we have two coequal gods, one good and one bad, one creator and one destroyer; or in our own religion we have a supreme God, the embodiment of righteousness and truth, and also a satanic majesty limited in power it is true, but marvelous in the magnitude of his deeds, most unrighteous and the father of liars? How is it that some gods have consorts, children even, and eat and drink and make merry and die? How is it that the same people worship one god in one city or province and another god in another city or province, or, if the same god, why is he called one name at Thebes and another at Heliopolis? Why is it we have one god at one age and another at a later, an El Shaddai in Abraham's time, and an Elohim or Jehovah at another, or, if coexisting, why so? Why do the strictly mono-

theistic Mohammedans have one hundred and eleven names for God? All these, and many other questions of similar import, are elements entering into the subject. Along with them are the various forms and phases of pantheism, polytheism, henotheism, monotheism, totemism, and fetishism, which must be analyzed and carefully examined from every standpoint, and their relations to, and dependence upon, each other, ascertained. Is polytheism first in point of time or monotheism, and does history furnish us any evidence upon the question?

If, as we have assumed, and as almost all scholars now admit, religion is universal among men, then it must be true that the seeds of religion are universally the same, and, as Max Müller remarks, that seed is the perception of the infinite. It is not claimed that this perception is in all people the same in degree, for apprehension does not include comprehension. Even if the starting point should be the same the growth in all cases will be more or less modified by the environments. For instance, it may be true that the Semitic mind in its first gropings after the infinite sprang from a single impulse and its first manifestation was simple and unique, and that the earliest name for god among the original Semitic stock was El, meaning power, or powerful, yet, in its subsequent development and growth, there have been many modifying factors resulting, in time, in the Babylonian, Arabian, Hebrew, Phœnician, and other religions more or less divergent and distinct. These elemental factors that have wrought such changes in historic religions, are many, but among them may be mentioned (1) difference in character of the races, (2) the nature of their homes and occupations, and (3) the political, social, moral and industrial relations sustained to other preceding or surrounding nations or peoples. Thus we notice, as observed by Professor Tiele, "the joyous, careless disposition of the sensual negro is reflected in his religion as clearly as the sombre melancholy character of the American Indian is in his."

And in all our investigations of this subject there is great need of caution, or the results will be unreliable. Many savage and semi-civilized peoples have no written records, no sacred books, from which we can learn their beliefs and interpret the

meaning of their simple modes of worship, much less obtain accurate ideas concerning their theogony. Hence in dealing with this class of people we are compelled to make frequent conditional statements, if we would be on the side of veracity. The little word *perhaps* is of frequent occurrence in the vocabulary of the historian, if he desires his statements to receive proper credence, and especially so, when he is dealing with uncivilized peoples, and those who have left scanty records of their acts and deeds.

Thus we are enabled to see at a glance a few of the elements of a general nature that enter into a study of man's conception of God. There are many other special elements that enter into a special study of specific religions, local in their nature, but none the less important and necessary to be considered